ROUGH GUIDES

# THE ROUGH GUIDE TO PANAMA

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME ON EARTH

# INSIDE THIS BOOK

**INTRODUCTION** What to see, what not to miss, itineraries and more – everything you need to get started

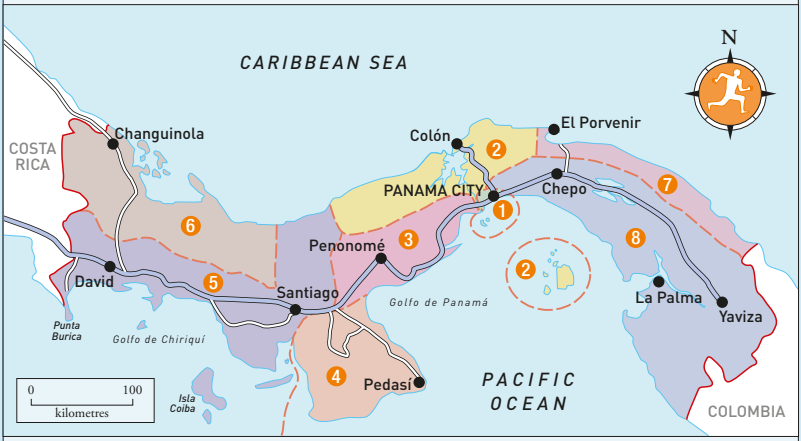
**BASICS** Pre-departure tips and practical information

**THE GUIDE** Comprehensive, in-depth guide to Panama, with area highlights and full-colour maps throughout

**CONTEXTS** History, wildlife and environmental issues, plus recommended books and a useful language section

We've flagged up our favourite places – a perfectly sited hotel, an atmospheric café, a special restaurant – throughout the Guide with the ★ symbol

**Panama** chapters

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2 The Panama Canal and central isthmus
3 Central Panama
4 The Azuero Peninsula
5 Chiriquí and Veraguas
6 Bocas del Toro
7 Guna Yala
8 The Darién and eastern Panama

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This third edition published November 2017

# THE ROUGH GUIDE TO
# PANAMA

This third edition updated by
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ROUGH GUIDES

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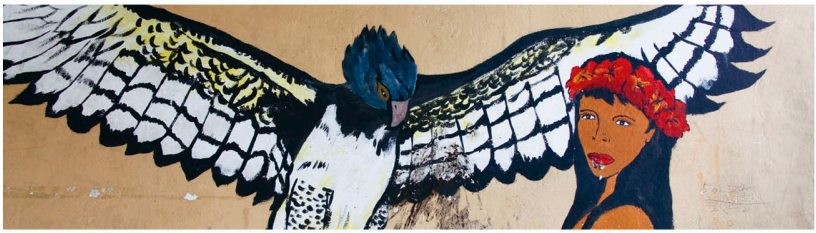
**OPPOSITE** EMBERÁ BASKET-WEAVING, CHAGRES **PREVIOUS PAGE** CHICHEME, GUNA YALA



# Introduction to Panama

Never has a country been so defined by its location. From the summit of Volcán Barú – Panama's highest peak – it's possible to watch the sun rise over both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, light slowly spreading across the water to reveal two glittering archipelagos. For centuries this slender isthmus has provided an invaluable shortcut between the two seas; you can witness it yourself, tramping the old mule trails of the Spanish conquistadors or gliding past forested islands along the world's most famous canal. Panama is a "biological corridor", too, linking the vast land masses of the Americas, and harbours tremendous biodiversity within its cloud-forested highlands, glorious palm-fringed islands, vast mangrove tracts and towering rainforests. The country also boasts Central America's most ebullient capital city, and if you're after riotous partying, be it at a small village festival or throughout the hedonistic marathon of Carnaval, you're in the right place.

Panama's compact size means the vast majority of its sights are **easily accessible**. From the comfort of your hotel in the capital, you can head out in the morning to hike through spectacular, primate-packed rainforest, or explore crumbling colonial forts, and the same evening be swinging your hips to salsa or dining by candlelight in a downtown hot spot. The ancient and modern, artificial and natural are irresistibly juxtaposed: vast container ships transiting the Canal slice through primeval rainforests teeming with fluorescent frogs and elusive wild cats, just thirty minutes by dugout from where Emberá villagers practise subsistence agriculture. Visiting the country's fringes and interior, you can explore uninhabited islands and untracked jungle, basing yourself in small towns, friendly villages and remote ecolodges.

Despite these attractions, Panama has often been overlooked as a tourist destination, overshadowed by its neighbour Costa Rica, and sometimes mistakenly viewed as a US annexe – thanks to the US occupation of the former Canal Zone and the dollarized

**ABOVE** STREET ART, PORTOBELO **OPPOSITE** BIOMUSEO, PANAMA CITY

economy. Add to that Panama's not entirely undeserved reputation for money-laundering and the current trend of attracting North American retirees, and it's perhaps not surprising that tourists have been slow to appreciate the country's multifaceted identity and outstanding natural beauty. Yet the US is only one of many **cultural influences** – which derive from Spain and other parts of Europe, West Africa, the West Indies, China, India and the Middle East – fused with the fascinating heritage of the eight **indigenous peoples** that survived the Spanish Conquest. Many of these indigenous communities welcome tourists, sharing their traditional skills, customs and modern-day challenges.

Panama's complexities and contradictions confront you at every turn, which can intrigue and frustrate in equal measure. The Panamanian government is actively promoting international **tourism**, yet there's often very little information on offer. The colourful traditional attire of Panama's indigenous populations is used unashamedly in promotional images, but the people themselves are frequently ignored by their government. Many inhabit the tropical rainforests of Panama's national parks and reserves, which remain tantalizingly underdeveloped and desperately underfunded; covering more than a third of Panama's land and marine territory, these ostensibly protected areas are threatened by government-sanctioned hydroelectric and mining projects, as well as by land-hungry cattle-farmers.

It's hard to visit Panama and not be both amazed and perturbed by the pace of change in this small, young nation, as skyscrapers gobble up Panama City's skyline and new roads and farms push deeper into the forests. Outside the big attractions, though, it's easy enough to get off the beaten track. Seek out and spend time in the country's **less-visited corners** – far-flung islands, isolated mountain hamlets, remote indigenous communities and untamed national parks – and you'll be afforded greater insights into this compelling, beautiful and often surprising country.

# PANAMA

CARIBBEAN SEA
COSTA RICA
Guabito
Changuinola
Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro
Bocas Town
Almirante
P.N. LA AMISTAD
P.N. MARINO ISLA BASTIMENTOS
Río Sereno
Cerro Punta
Chiriquí Grande
Boquete
Volcán
Volcán Barú
P.N. VOLCÁN BARÚ
Paso Canoas
David
Golfo de los Mosquitos
San Miguel de la Borda
Coclé del Norte
Lago Gatún
P.N. OMAR TORRIJOS
P.N. ALTOS DE CAMPANA
P.N. SANTA FÉ
El Copé
El Valle
Penonomé
Santa Fé
Antón
Aguadulce
San Félix
Boca Chica
Las Lajas
INTERAMERICANA
Santiago
P.N. SARIGUA
Puerto Armuelles
Punta Burica
P.N. MARINO GOLFO DE CHIRIQUÍ
Golfo de Chiriquí
Sona
Chitré
Las Tablas
Mariato
P.N. COIBA
Santa Catalina
Península de Azuero
Isla Coiba
Isla Cébaco
Tonosí
Isla de Cañas
Punta Mariato
P.N. CERRO HOYA
N
0
50
kilometres

Metres
2000
1000
500
200
0
P.N. PORTOBELO
Isla Grande
Portobelo
El Porvenir
Archipiélago Guna Yala (San Blas)
Corazón de Jesús
Cartí
Colón
P.N. CHAGRES
P.N. SOBERANÍA
Playón Chico
Chepo
Lago Bayano
Gamboa
Panama Canal
P.N. CAMINO DE CRUCES
PANAMA CITY
Balboa
INTERAMERICANA
Tubuala
La Chorrera
Isla Taboga
Isla Contadora
Meteti
Río Chucunaque
Puerto Obaldía
La Palma
Golfo de Panamá
Archipiélago de las Perlas
Yaviza
El Real
Garachiné
Río Sambú
Río Tuira
P.N. DARIÉN
Isla Iguana
Pedasí
Jaqué
COLOMBIA
PACIFIC OCEAN

## FACT FILE

- Though Panama has one of the highest **GDP** growth rates in Latin America – around 5.8 percent in 2016 – it also has the second highest level of income **inequality**.
- Panama hosts 987 species of **bird**, including the odd-looking three-wattled bellbird, resident in the Chiriquí Highlands, whose extraordinary "bonk" call can be heard almost 1km away.
- Panama City's new 14km **metro** line cost an estimated $1.88 billion, with a further $2.2 billion earmarked for a second line due for completion in 2019.
- The original **Panama Canal** took more than 60 million pounds of dynamite to blast through the isthmus; the ships laden with the explosives each contained twenty thousand boxes that all had to be unloaded by hand.
- The **Guna**, Panama's most high-profile indigenous people, have one of the highest rates of albinism in the world with one in 150 being born a "moon child".

# Where to go

The vast majority of visitors fly in to cosmopolitan **Panama City**, where brash skyscrapers stare across the bay at the rocky peninsula of **Casco Viejo**, the city's rapidly transforming colonial centre, whose elegantly restored mansions, churches and leafy plazas demand at least a day's leisurely exploration. If you're planning a short visit, it's easy to base yourself in the city and make daily forays to the monumental **Panama Canal** and the Spanish **colonial forts** of San Lorenzo and Portobelo. Should the frenetic energy and interminable traffic din of the city's clogged arteries get too much, an exhilarating excursion to the **Archipiélago de las Perlas**, or a relaxing outing birdwatching in the **Parque Nacional Soberanía** or kayaking down the **Río Chagres** are all possible without forgoing the epicurean delights of the capital's sophisticated bars and restaurants in the evening.

After Panama City, the country's most popular tourist area is the Caribbean archipelago of **Bocas del Toro**, close to the Costa Rican border. Its deserted stretches of sand, powerful surf and colourful coral reefs are matched by an often-forgotten mainland that offers spectacular wilderness hiking as well as wildlife viewing in the Humedales de San San Pond Sak. Bocas's bohemian vibe and Afro-Caribbean culture contrasts with the vast archipelago of **Guna Yala**, which extends for hundreds of kilometres along Panama's eastern Caribbean coast, and is home to Panama's most politically independent and culturally distinct indigenous people, the Guna. Here you can live out your desert-island fantasies swinging in a hammock and sleeping in simple cane *cabañas* on picture-postcard cays of white sand and coconut palms. With more time, you can experience the aquatic wonderlands off the Pacific coast, with world-class scuba diving, snorkelling and sport fishing in the mangrove-rich protected marine parks of the **Golfo de Chiriquí**, and **Coiba**, the penal colony turned wildlife reserve. The latter is generally reached from the laidback surfing hot spot of **Santa Catalina**.

From there it's a short hop east to the rolling pastureland and quaint villages of the **Azuero Peninsula**, a region that revels in its colonial heritage. Once neglected by visitors, its joyous festivals, including the country's most ardent **Carnaval**, overflow with enthusiastic accordion and violin playing, colourful costumes, masks, rodeos and lashings of seco – Panama's potent national tipple – and provide ample opportunities to interact with the outgoing populace.

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** THE CHIRIQUÍ HIGHLANDS; A NGÄBE FAMILY; CASCO VIEJO, PANAMA CITY

## ARTS AND CRAFTS IN PANAMA

It may not have the sprawling markets of Mexico or Guatemala, but Panama's arts and crafts are thriving, and reflect the country's multi-ethnic make-up. From appliqué textiles to coiled basketry, woodcarving to mask-making, here's our pick of the top five crafts:

**Basketry and woodcarving** Head for the Darién to pick up some exquisite Emberá basketry in villages such as Mogué and La Chunga, or smooth cocobolo and tagua carvings of animals in Wounaan communities such as Puerto Lara. **See p.284, p.287 & p.278.**

**Beaded necklaces** Though once fashioned out of dyed pebbles, shells and bone worn by Ngäbe and Buglé warriors, these modern-day colourful *nguñunkua* (*chaquira* in Spanish) still make beautiful adornments. You'll find them sold in stalls along the Interamericana near Tolé. **See p.204.**

**Devil masks** Although made for festivals around the country, the most famous mask-makers hail from La Villa de los Santos and Chitré, their workshops stuffed full of terrifying salivating dragon or gargoyle-like monsters in kaleidoscopic colours. **See p.159.**

**Molas** Guna women's distinctive multicoloured, embroidered *molas* are transformed into everything from cushion covers to Christmas stockings using traditional geometric designs or modern-day icons such as Batman. They're widely available everywhere in Guna Yala, and you'll find them on the street corners of Panama City. **See p.85, p.134 & p.259.**

**Straw hats** Panama's hats may not be Panama hats – those are made in Ecuador – but some finely woven specimens are available: consider buying a *sombrero pintao* in La Pintada, or an *ocueño* in Ocu. **See p.143 & p.161.**

The dorsal mountain range dividing Panama's two coasts rises dramatically from the Pacific coastal plains that constitute the country's agricultural heartlands, with the most impressive peaks in the spectacular **national parks** of Chiriquí's **Western Highlands**, surrounding the alpine towns of **Boquete** and the less touristed **Cerro Punta**, which lie either side of brooding **Volcán Barú**. Here it's hard to resist the allure of verdant cloud forests filled with orchids, quetzals and hummingbirds, precision rows of shade-grown coffee plantations and fast-flowing rivers, perfect for whitewater rafting, and a range of adventure activities. Further east, the **Cordillera Central** hosts more parks and rainforested peaks laced with waterfalls above the small communities of **El Copé**, **Santa Fé** and **El Valle**, all of which offer rewarding hiking, birdwatching and horseriding.

Few visitors venture east of Panama City to the **Darién** jungle, which has gained almost mythical status, as much for FARC guerrillas and drug-traffickers as for its spectacular scenery and wildlife. Requiring patience, money and more than a smattering of Spanish, the rewards are ample: sinuous river journeys by dugout, great canopies of cathedral-like rainforests sheltering some of Panama's most spectacular fauna, and remote Emberá and Wounaan communities, keen to share their skills and culture with visitors.

**ABOVE** NGÄBE *CHAQUIRA* **OPPOSITE FROM TOP** HARPY EAGLE; FESTIVAL DE LA MEJORANA; GUNA YALA FROM THE AIR

# Author picks

To research this guide, the authors spent countless hours hunched over in dugout canoes, tramping though steamy rainforests and fending off sandflies as they journeyed from the cocktail bars of Bocas to Emberá and Wounaan villages deep in the Darién. Here are some of their personal picks.

**Thrilling boat trip** The Humedales de San San Pond Sak (p.240) are at their best at sunrise as the mist clears; glide through the wetlands spotting herons and hawks, sloths and snakes, and the extraordinary-looking manatee.

**Wow-factor birdwatching** After a dawn hike through the Darién rainforest, and a lengthy stakeout of a nest, the sight of a majestic adult harpy eagle swooping down to feed its chick is truly special (p.285).

**Exhilarating flight** Peering out of your eight-seater twin-prop over Guna Yala (p.252) will leave you gasping at the countless tiny specks of white sand dotted with coconut palms that dazzle in translucent turquoise shallows.

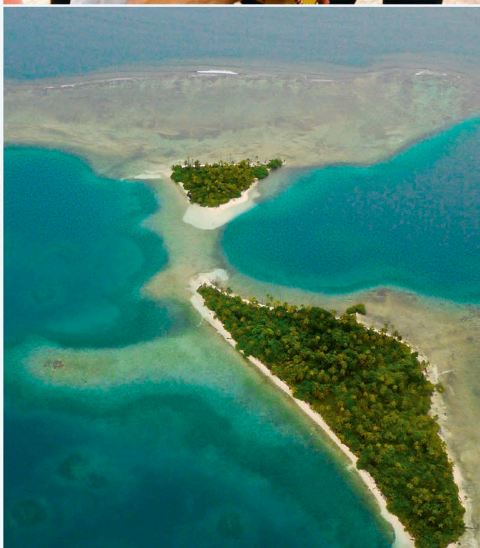
**Panoramic views** The vistas from the summit of Cerro Ancón (p.68) take your breath away: on one side the city with its shimmering skyscrapers dwarfing the colonial architecture of Casco Viejo, on the other a procession of vast ships passing through the Panama Canal.

**Challenging hike** It's hard to beat the four-day trek across the cordillera from Boquete to Bocas (p.187), hiking through cloud forest, traversing rivers and sleeping in Ngäbe villages, with the reward of a soak in the Caribbean at the end.

**Fabulous fiesta** While the extreme hedonism of Carnaval grabs the headlines, tiny Guararé's Festival de la Mejorana (p.165) is a more mellow but equally joyous affair, including heavy doses of *pindín* – upbeat folk music featuring accordion-playing – and competitions in traditional skills.

**Lipsmacking ice cream** The sweltering heat of Panama City is best alleviated by a cone from *Granclement* (p.80): choose from mouthwatering sorbets and unusually flavoured *helados* from Earl Grey tea to vanilla and walnut.

Our author recommendations don't end here. We've flagged up our favourite places – a perfectly sited hotel, an atmospheric café, a special restaurant – throughout the Guide, highlighted with the ★ symbol.



# When to go

Squeezed between seven and nine degrees north of the equator, Panama is located firmly within the **tropics**, with a climate to match: relentlessly hot and humid in the lowlands, cooling off fractionally to give balmy nights, whereas in the highlands, temperatures vary significantly with altitude, and can be chilly at night.

Most travellers visit during the shorter **dry season** (*verano*, "summer"), which runs from mid-December to the end of April, and with good reason. Azure skies predominate, at least on the drier Pacific plains, sheltered by Panama's mountainous spine. The firmer going underfoot makes it easier to travel on unpaved roads and explore the rainforests, and the reduced rainwater run-off ensures clearer waters to swim in. The dry season also includes the lively holiday periods of Christmas, New Year, Carnaval and Holy Week, when flights and hotels in popular tourist spots are at a premium.

You'll avoid the crowds and the price hikes in the **rainy season** (*invierno*, "winter"), which stretches roughly from May to mid-December. Although the mountainous and rainforested regions in Panama are best avoided during the wettest months, since peaks are constantly swathed in cloud and tracks are boggy, if you stick to the lowland areas on the Pacific coast, the downpours, while frequent and intense, rarely last more than a few hours, leaving plenty of sunny, dry periods to enjoy. In particular, the otherwise parched Azuero Peninsula offers much more picturesque scenery during its understated rainy season.

By contrast, the **Caribbean coast** receives almost twice as much rain as the Pacific, with virtually no recognizable dry season. Regional variations impact here too: the trade winds (strongest Dec–Feb) make the water choppy and outer islands inaccessible in Bocas del Toro and Guna Yala, while Bocas enjoys two relatively dry spells around March and October.

## AVERAGE DAILY TEMPERATURES AND RAINFALL

| | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **PANAMA CITY** | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Max/min (°C) | 30/22 | 31/22 | 32/23 | 32/23 | 31/24 | 30/23 | 30/23 | 31/23 | 30/23 | 30/23 | 30/23 | 30/23 |
| Max/min (°F) | 86/71 | 87/71 | 89/73 | 89/73 | 87/75 | 86/73 | 86/73 | 87/73 | 86/73 | 86/73 | 86/73 | 86/73 |
| Rainfall (mm) | 33 | 18 | 13 | 74 | 201 | 203 | 178 | 198 | 198 | 262 | 254 | 137 |
| **BOQUETE** | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Max/min (°C) | 25/13 | 27/13 | 28/14 | 29/14 | 28/15 | 27/14 | 27/14 | 27/14 | 27/14 | 28/14 | 27/14 | 27/13 |
| Max/min (°F) | 77/55 | 80/56 | 82/58 | 84/59 | 82/59 | 80/58 | 81/58 | 81/58 | 80/57 | 83/57 | 81/56 | 82/56 |
| Rainfall (mm) | 2.5 | 38 | 81 | 231 | 472 | 432 | 467 | 660 | 546 | 925 | 376 | 121 |
| **BOCAS DEL TORO** | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Max/min (°C) | 31/20 | 31/20 | 31/21 | 31/21 | 32/22 | 32/22 | 32/22 | 32/22 | 32/22 | 32/22 | 32/22 | 31/21 |
| Max/min (°F) | 88/68 | 88/68 | 88/70 | 88/70 | 90/72 | 90/72 | 90/72 | 90/72 | 90/72 | 90/72 | 90/72 | 88/70 |
| Rainfall (mm) | 204 | 235 | 188 | 323 | 273 | 287 | 387 | 346 | 254 | 219 | 390 | 485 |

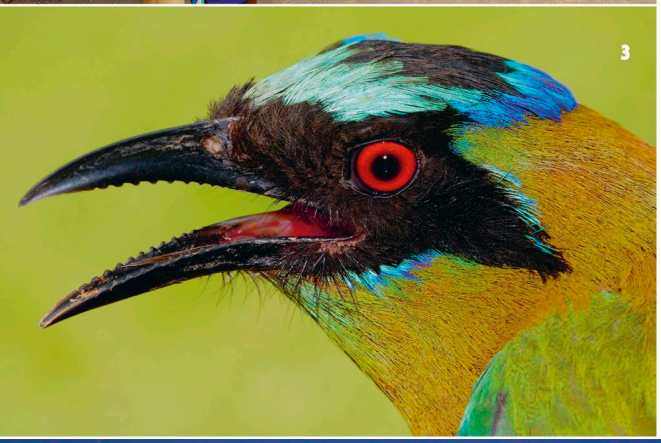
**OPPOSITE FROM TOP** SURFER, SANTA CATALINA; LOTTERY STALL, CHITRÉ

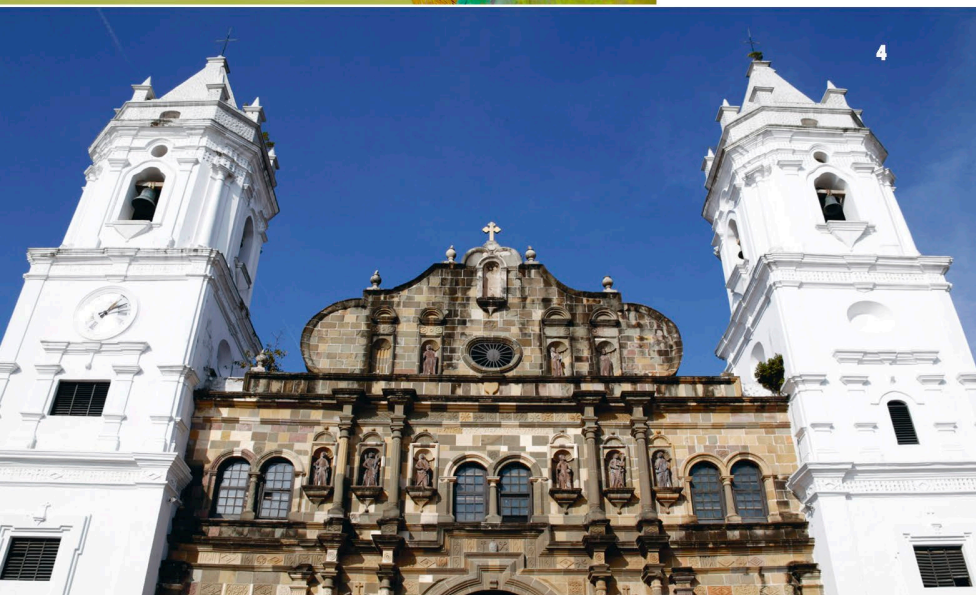
PINTAS

# 17

# things not to miss

It's not possible to see everything Panama has to offer in one trip – and we don't suggest you try. What follows, in no particular order, is a selective taste of the country's highlights: remote islands, great coffee, colonial architecture and unique wildlife. All highlights are colour-coded by chapter and have a page reference to take you straight into the Guide, where you can find out more.





### 1 ARCHIPIÉLAGO DE LAS PERLAS

Page 120

A myriad of idyllic tropical islands ringed with white-sand beaches and azure waters.

### 2 STAY IN AN EMBERÁ VILLAGE

Pages 104 & 283

Challenge the cultural stereotypes by experiencing village life with the Emberá or Wounaan in the forests of the Darién and Chagres national parks.

### 3 BIRDWATCHING

Page 37

Get close to the country's 987 bird species – including dazzling hummingbirds, the resplendent quetzal and, pictured here, the blue-crowned motmot.

### 4 COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE

Pages 110, 148 & 57

From ruined Caribbean fortresses to Baroque Pacific churches, Panama possesses some fine Conquest-era buildings, including Panama City's Catedral Metropolitana with its gleaming spires.

### 5 CASCO VIEJO
Page 56
Hip bars and chic restaurants rub shoulders with colonial churches and leafy plazas in Panama City's historic centre.

### 6 SANTA FÉ DE VERAGUAS
Page 207
A fresh climate, picturesque waterfalls and an abundance of glorious orchids make this village an appealing retreat.

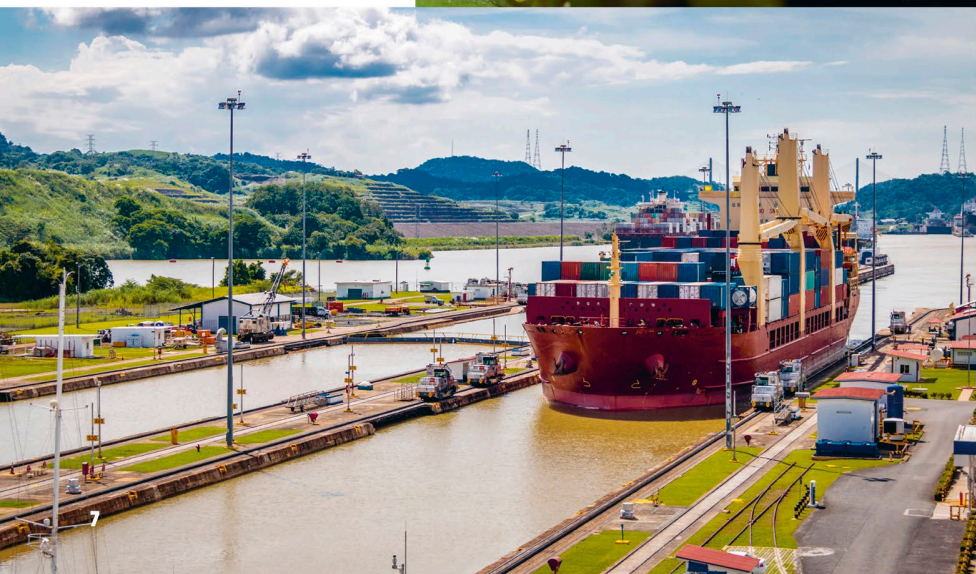
### 7 PANAMA CANAL
Page 95
Experience the twentieth century's greatest engineering feat with a transit through the locks.

### 8 ISLAND LIFE IN GUNA YALA
Page 246
Sleep in a cane-and-thatch *cabaña* amid swaying coconut palms, and dip into the warm Caribbean waters.

### 9 SANTA CATALINA
Page 210
Surfing hot spot with glorious sunsets and a wealth of outdoor adventures.

### 10 THE CHIRIQUÍ HIGHLANDS
Page 184
Get up close to spectacular scenery – including fast-flowing rivers and dazzling waterfalls.

### 11 SNORKELLING AND DIVING
Pages 227, 254 & 211
The coral reefs of the Caribbean offer superb snorkelling; for world-class diving, head to Isla Coiba.



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### 12 COFFEE IN BOQUETE
Page 187

Learn to detect floral, caramel, citrus and spice aromas in some of the world's finest gourmet coffee estates.

### 13 CHILLING IN BOCAS
Page 222

Laidback bars, party hostels, mellow lodges and Caribbean cuisine make Bocas a fine spot to let your hair down for a few days.

### 14 DARIÉN BOAT TRIPS
Page 276

Glide upriver into one of the world's last remaining wilderness areas, viewing vast buttress roots, tangled vines and the soaring forest canopy.

### 15 GUNA CULTURE
Page 264

Learn about the rich cultural traditions of the island-dwelling Guna.

### 16 FESTIVALS
Page 37

Panama's diverse heritage has resulted in a fascinating array of festivals, from the wild Carnaval party in Las Tablas to the vibrant, rebellious celebration of Afro-Colonial culture in the Caribbean's annual *congos*.

### 17 HIKING
Page 38

The combination of magnificent views, picturesque waterfalls and lush forest makes hiking in central and western Panama a constant delight.

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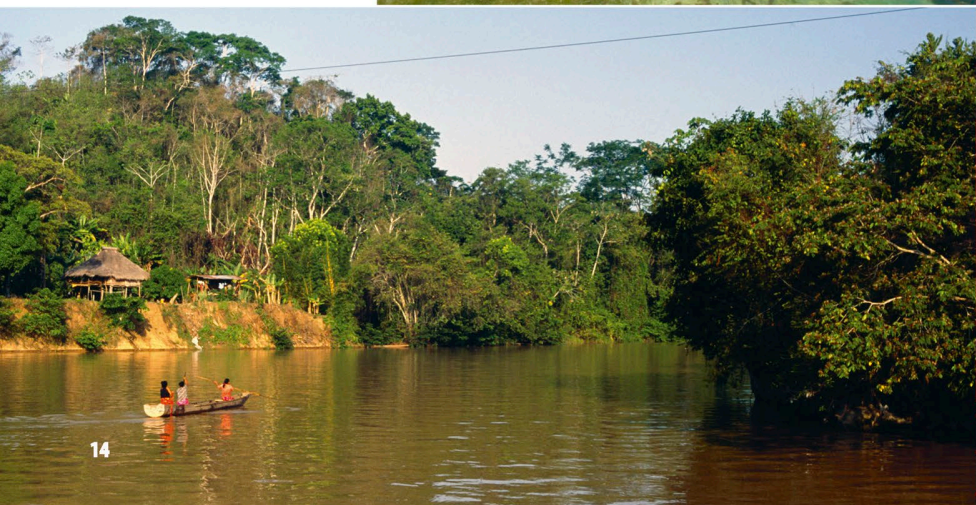
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# Itineraries

These itineraries cover the length and breadth of the isthmus, from idyllic Caribbean beaches to steaming rainforests. Limited roads and facilities in the Canal area and eastern Panama mean that in many cases the capital will necessarily serve as a hub, either as a base for day-trips or as a transit point during longer excursions.

## THE GRAND TOUR

A grand tour of Panama is manageable in two weeks, mostly using the capital as a base but with a few nights in appealing provincial towns and tropical beach hideaways. For a richer experience, take it at a more leisurely pace.

❶ **Panama City** Get to know the vibrant capital, exploring its sights and nightlife and hopping out on a wealth of day-trips. **See p.52**

❷ **The Canal** Watch giant container ships squeeze through the locks, or experience a partial transit by boat. **See p.95**

❸ **Parque Nacional Soberanía** A short bus ride beyond the Miraflores Locks, this accessible park offers excellent rainforest hiking and birdwatching. **See p.98**

❹ **San Lorenzo** The forts at Portobelo may boast more cannons, but San Lorenzo's atmospheric location, towering above the Río Chagres, is unbeatable. **See p.110**

❺ **Guna Yala** Accessible as a day-trip from the capital, but better as a three-day escape: stay in cane-and-thatch *cabañas* on tranquil tropical beaches. **See p.246**

❻ **El Valle** Flower-filled crater town, surrounded by scenic hills, two hours west of Panama City by bus. An ideal place to unwind for a couple of days. **See p.134**

❼ **Boquete** Two bus changes away, in the Chiriquí Highlands, this scenic centre of gourmet coffee production and adventure activities merits at least three days. **See p.184**

❽ **Bocas del Toro** A trip across the cordillera takes you to bohemian Bocas – enjoy diving, surfing and snorkelling by day, and drinking, dining and partying by night. Great day-trips, too. **See p.218**

## SAND, SEA AND SURF

You could spend sixteen to eighteen days enjoying the best beaches, surf spots, islands and marine reserves of Panama's Caribbean and Pacific coastlines.

❶ **Playa Bluff** A flight or overnight bus trip from the capital takes you to Bocas Town; Playa Bluff is its finest beach. Relax in a Caribbean eco-retreat overlooking a 5km expanse of deserted sand and pounding surf, and in season watch turtles lay their eggs. **See p.225**

❷ **Golfo de Chiriquí** A lengthy bus journey across the cordillera brings you to Boca Chica village; book into a boutique lodging and kayak around the coastal mangroves and secluded coves of the nearby Pacific islands. **See p.202**

❸ **Santa Catalina** Panama's top surfing spot has a world-class break, a good beach for novices and a mellow après-surf scene. **See p.210**

**ABOVE** GUNA YALA

❹ **Isla Coiba** A short boat trip away, Coiba is a diver's paradise, with great snorkelling too. **See p.213**

❺ **Playa Reina, Mariato** This little-known beach hotel on the western Azuero offers plenty of water-based fun, plus stunning sunsets. **See p.176**

❻ **Archipiélago de las Perlas** Accessible by boat or plane from Panama City, Isla Contadora, with its splendid beaches, makes a good base for sailing out to the archipelago's deserted cays and islands. **See p.120**

❼ **Western Guna Yala** Laze away your days in idyllic cays, palm-topped islands and translucent warm waters – the quintessential Caribbean paradise. **See p.254**

## CULTURES AND CRAFTS

By swapping modern hotel comforts for basic rural lodgings, you'll gain great insights into Panama's cultural and colonial heritage. Count on two or three nights per stop, adding a five-day Emberá stay in the Darién if you're feeling adventurous.

❶ **Naso communities** The provincial town of Changuinola, a flight or bus ride away from Panama City, is the launch pad for trips up the Río Teribe to visit Seiyik, seat of the Naso monarch, and to float downriver on a bamboo raft. **See p.242**

❷ **Silico Creek** Stay in traditional *cabañas* in this Ngäbe village, learning about organic perma-culture and tasting artisanal chocolate.. **See p.238**

❸ **Santa Fé de Veraguas** A long bus journey takes you to this delightful mountain village, where a tour of the coffee cooperative gives a fascinating taste of the community's history. **See p.207**

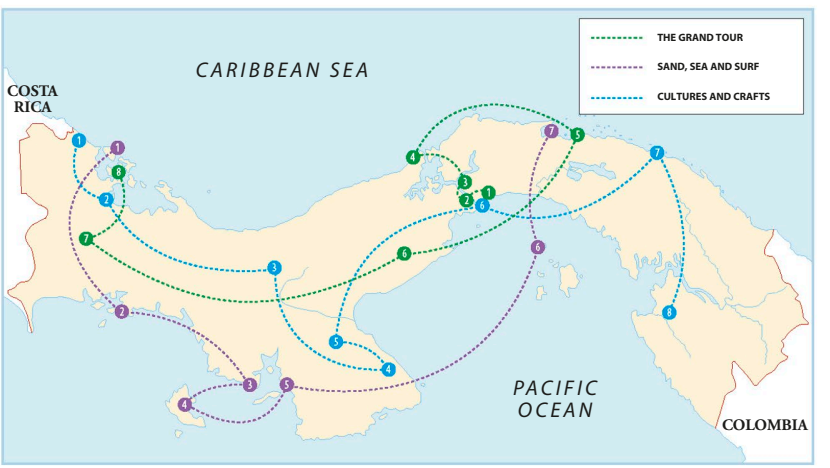
❹ **An Azuero festival** Head southeast to laidback Las Tablas, and aim to time your trip to coincide with one of the peninsula's many riotous festivals: heady mixes of the religious and profane, colonial and indigenous, traditional and modern. **See p.155 & p.165**

❺ **Azueran crafts** On your way back to Panama City, drop in to see the devil mask-makers of Chitré and the women's hat-making cooperative in nearby Ocú. **See p.159 & p.161**

❻ **Casco Viejo, Panama City** Steeped in colonial history, the capital's old city centre is also awash with shops and stalls selling crafts – jewellery, clothing, baskets, masks, hats, carvings – made in far-flung communities around the country. **See p.56**

❼ **Guna Yala** After a bumpy plane or jeep ride to the *comarca* from the capital, experience first-hand how the women make their colourful *molas* and *winis*. **See p.254**

❽ **Emberá homestay** A full day's travel each way (by bus and dugout) from Panama City brings you to the welcoming Darién community of La Chunga. Gain insights into the culture, from basketry to medicinal plants, and sleep in an open-sided *bujia* (wooden house on stilts). **See p.287**



CARNAVAL DANCER, PANAMA CITY

# Basics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# Getting there

**The vast majority of visitors to Panama arrive by air, landing at Tocumen International Airport in Panama City. Seats are generally more expensive and more heavily subscribed during the dry season (late Dec to April), especially the peak holiday periods of Christmas, Easter and Carnaval (usually in Feb) when many Panamanians living in the US return home. Thus, high season broadly counts as December through to the end of April, low season May to November. Though flights are easily booked online it is still sometimes cheaper to make arrangements via a travel agent – bearing in mind the crucial distinction between Panama City in Central America (airport code PTY) and the Panama City in Florida (airport code PFN).**

Panama's reliable no-frills **national carrier**, Copa Airlines (Ⓦcopaair.com), often offers the best rates and has an efficient online booking service. It flies to and from several US cities and numerous destinations in Latin America and the Caribbean, with three connecting flights a day from Tocumen to the airport at David, capital of Chiriquí province, in the far west of the country. The new **Panamá Pacífico International Airport**, formerly the US Howard Air Force base in the Canal Zone, 9km southwest of Balboa, accommodates a couple of Latin American low-cost airlines and charter flights.

Visitors travelling down from **Central America** may choose to make the longer but cheaper bus journey through Costa Rica, generally along the Pan-American Highway via the Pacific border crossing at Paso Canoas, though there are a couple of other border posts at Río Sereno in the Western Highlands and at Guabito on the Caribbean (or Atlantic) coast in Bocas del Toro.

Alternatives to flying from **South America** are a great deal more complicated, involving a number of boat and bus journeys on the Caribbean side, and are only for the adventurous. Cruise ship visitors will dock at the cruise ship terminals in either Colón, at the Caribbean end of the Panama Canal, or on the Calzada de Amador in Panama City, on the Pacific side. Sailing boats carrying backpackers from Cartagena usually unload passengers in Puerto Lindo or Portobelo, along the coast in Colón province. Other yacht arrivals will probably call in at the Balboa Yacht Club on the Calzada de Amador or at the Shelter Bay Marina west of Colón.

## Visas and red tape

Tourists from **most European countries**, plus the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, do not need a visa. They can get their passport stamped for ninety days on arrival provided they can produce a passport valid for at least six months after departure, an onward (or return) bus or plane ticket and proof of funds (usually $500 or a credit card).

That said, check for the latest **regulations** at a Panamanian consulate in advance and don't forget that if you are transiting via the US, you will need a transit visa, or a visa waiver (ESTA) application in advance of travel (see Ⓦusimmigrationsupport.org), as well as a machine-readable passport. The Panamanian immigration authorities' website is also worth checking (Ⓦmigracion.gob.pa).

If you are arriving from one of the WHO-listed yellow fever countries you may be asked to produce your vaccination certificate (see p.33).

The only way to **extend your stay** is to pop over to Costa Rica for a couple of days before returning, brandishing a return bus ticket.

## Flights from the US and Canada

There are numerous **direct flights**: Delta (Ⓦdelta.com), United (Ⓦunited.com) and American Airlines (Ⓦaa.com) alongside Copa (Ⓦcopaair.com) and Avianca (Ⓦavianca.com) fly daily to Panama City from various US cities, including Miami – the main portal, offering several daily connections – plus New York, Washington, Los Angeles and Orlando.

**A BETTER KIND OF TRAVEL**

At Rough Guides we are passionately committed to travel. We believe it helps us understand the world we live in and the people we share it with – and of course tourism is vital to many developing economies. But the scale of modern tourism has also damaged some places irreparably, and climate change is accelerated by most forms of transport, especially flying. All Rough Guides' flights are carbon-offset, and every year we donate money to a variety of environmental charities.

Including the relevant taxes, return **fares** from Miami, for example, range from US$700 (low season) to US$900 (high season), from New York or Washington US$750–1100 and from Los Angeles US$750–1000.

There are no direct flights from **Canada**; connections have to be made in the US or Mexico, making it at least a nine-hour journey, with typical prices of Can$800–1100. Slightly cheaper, direct charter flights can sometimes be bought in high season through Transat (Ⓦtransat.com) from Calgary, Montréal and Toronto or through Sunwing (Ⓦflysunwing.ca) from Montréal and Toronto to **Río Hato** airport at Playa Blanca.

## Flights from the UK and Ireland

Although there are currently no direct flights from the **UK** or **Ireland**, Lufthansa (Ⓦlufthansa.com) operates five flights a week from Frankfurt, and generally offers the cheapest deal from London and Ireland (£600–800 return). It's slightly more expensive to travel with KLM (Ⓦklm.com), which offers daily flights to Panama City from Amsterdam, and Air France (Ⓦairfrance.com), which makes the trip five times a week from Paris. Iberia (Ⓦiberia.com) has frequent, but even more expensive departures from several Spanish cities. The cheapest route from the UK or Ireland is sometimes via the US with a US carrier (see p.24), though the lengthier flying time and the extra hassle of clearing US immigration generally makes this less appealing than flying via Europe.

## Flights from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa

It is a long, expensive haul to Panama from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, with no direct flights. Most routes from **Australia** (Aus$3500–4000) and New Zealand (NZ$4000–4400) travel via the US, generally passing through Los Angeles, though flights via Santiago or Buenos Aires are also possible with the journey time (26hr-plus) staying much the same. From **South Africa** (30hr-plus), you can travel via London, South America or the US (ZAR$19,000–22,000).

## Flights from Central and South America

Various countries in **Latin America** have direct connections with Panama City, generally either through Avianca or, more usually, Copa, which connects with more than forty destinations across Latin America and the Caribbean. In Costa Rica, award-winning Nature Air (Ⓦnatureair.com) operates daily flights from San José to Bocas del Toro (US$360 return, including carbon offsetting), while Panama's domestic carrier Air Panama (Ⓦairpanama.com) makes six trips a week (except Sun) from San José to Panama City (from US$226 return). Copa's low-cost airline, Wingo (Ⓦwingo.com) offers cheap connections with several Colombian destinations (Medellín from $160 return, for example) as well as San José in Costa Rica ($228 return) – note that flights land at the new **Panamá Pacífico** airport (see p.73). Low-cost airline Viva Colombia (Ⓦvivacolombia.co) also uses the new airport and other South American budget airlines are said to be considering flights here.

## Buses from Central America

It is possible to travel overland along the **Pan-American Highway** from Tapachula in Mexico to Panama City (with drop-offs at David and Santiago), with **Ticabus** (Ⓦticabus.com; US$144 one way). Buses are comfortable and air-conditioned, offering the obligatory diet of Hollywood movies; they pick up (and drop off) passengers at the major Central American cities on the way, though you will have to spend a couple of nights in hotels, which increases the cost. **Transportes Galgos** (Ⓦtransgalgosintergt.com) will also get you to Guatemala City from Tapachula (US$30 one way), from where you can transfer to Ticabus. **Agencia Tracopa** (Ⓦtracopacr.com) operates a twice-daily service from San José to David (US$21 one way).

## Boats from Colombia

The only break in the 50,000km or so Pan-American Highway is an 87km stretch of swamp and mountainous jungle between Carepa on the Colombian border and Yaviza in Panama, in what is known as the **Darién Gap** (see p.43 & p.279). Up until the early 1990s, thrashing your way through here **overland** was a famous challenge for adventurers. However, crossing the Darién Gap has been forbidden for several years – the presence of drug-traffickers, Colombian paramilitaries and smugglers make it extremely dangerous, with the threat of death or kidnapping adding to the usual jungle hazards.

A (somewhat) safer alternative for those wanting to save money on air fares is to travel by **boat** along the Caribbean coast, though if you are out of luck with the weather, timings and bookings, the overall saving is likely to be negligible. Still, an adventure of sorts is guaranteed. This route requires a reasonable command of Spanish or a travelling companion who

### SAILING BETWEEN COLOMBIA AND PANAMA – THE CLASSIC BACKPACKER ROUTE

A popular passage between Colombia and Panama involves a four- to five-day **sailing trip** between **Cartagena** or **Sapzurro** (close to the Colombia–Panama border) – taking in some of the more remote tropical islands of Guna Yala – and Cartí (see p.251), from where it's another US$40 to reach Panama City; Portobelo (see p.112); or Puerto Lindo (see p.117). Typically backpacker rates are US$500–550 per person from Cartagena (US$450–500 from Sapzurro), including food and non-alcoholic drinks, though some deals require you to help around the ship, be it crewing or cooking. In addition to being cheaper, the Sapzurro route has the advantage of avoiding the roughest seas by hugging the coast, thereby affording more time to explore Guna Yala. Be prepared to hang around at your departure point for a few days, since preparations can take some time. **Horror stories** abound of drunken captains and poorly maintained boats, so do your homework; hostel recommendations of particular captains can be helpful, but should be viewed critically since hostels usually receive commission for supplying passengers. You're best getting the lowdown from other people who have made the trip. Bear in mind, too, that this trip is **seasonal** – sailing between November and February can be dangerous with rough seas, so much so that some captains do not make the crossing during that period.

can speak the language. A **multiday sailing trip** from Cartagena or Sapzurro in Colombia to Colón province is another possibility (see box above).

To make the coastal journey from Colombia, it is first necessary to get to **Turbo**, a small city in the Antioquia department on the Pan-American Highway (accessible by regular buses from Medellín, which are safe during the day), or the nicer **Necoclí**, which lies nearer Cartagena. Both have a regular morning launch (8–9am) to **Capurganá** (2hr 30min from Turbo, US$21; 1hr 30min from Necoclí, US$23), a burgeoning low-key Caribbean resort unreachable by road. Note that in high season (Dec–April) there is usually more than one departure a day from Turbo. From Capurganá it is possible to sail to **Puerto Obaldía** (1hr; around US$10, depending on numbers), a small military outpost across the border in Panama, at the eastern end of Guna Yala. Since there is no regular crossing to Puerto Obaldía, departure times and charges from Capurganá depend on numbers, though the place is pleasant enough to hang out in for a few days while you're waiting for fellow travellers to roll up. Note also that both sea crossings can be exceedingly rough (especially between Nov and Feb) and are not for the faint-hearted; the boats are small and the waves loom large, though life jackets are provided. A large plastic bag to cover your luggage is a must, as well as waterproof protection for yourself.

**Moving on** from Puerto Obaldía, you can fly to Albrook Airport, the domestic airport in Panama City (1hr; US$105), with Air Panama (daily except Sat), though timings can vary. Alternatively, if you're feeling adventurous and are prepared to hang around in Puerto Obaldía, you can get a ride on one of the speedboats bound for Cartí, at the western end of Guna Yala. Note that this will be as expensive as flying (see p.268) and can be horrifically uncomfortable if the waves are high.

### Red tape

Before leaving Colombia, get an exit stamp from **immigration** at Capurganá (daily 9am–5pm) and an entry stamp for Panama on arrival in Puerto Obaldía (daily 8am–4pm). Military police will meet the boat and escort you to the relevant authorities. Your belongings will be thoroughly searched for drugs and you are likely to be required to show proof of onward travel, possibly a yellow fever vaccination certificate (see p.33), and sufficient funds (a credit card will do) to cover your stay. A serious grilling and further searches may await you at customs and immigration at Albrook Airport in Panama City.

## Agents and operators

Only a handful of operators offer Panama-only tours; most combine a visit with Costa Rica or other countries in Central America. While packages are convenient, it's cheapest to book your flight to Panama using a regular travel agent and then arrange your itinerary with a Panama City-based tour operator (see p.76).

**Audley Travel** UK ☎ 01993 838 675, 🌐 **audleytravel.com.** Several packages to Panama (eleven to nineteen days), including birdwatching and a highlights tour taking in Panama City, the Canal, Bocas and Guna Yala.

**Journey Latin America** UK ☎ 020 3811 6508, 🌐 **journeylatinamerica.co.uk.** Long-established UK-based tour operator offering tailor-made itineraries and tours; includes trips combining Panama with Costa Rica and other countries, as well as a Panama highlights package.

**North South Travel** UK 01245 608291, northsouthtravel.co.uk. Friendly, competitive travel agency, offering discounted fares worldwide. Profits are used to support projects in the developing world, especially the promotion of sustainable tourism.

**STA Travel** UK 0333 321 0099, US 1 800 781 4040, Australia 134 782, New Zealand 0800 474 400, South Africa 0861 781 781; statravel.co.uk. Worldwide specialists in independent travel; also student IDs, travel insurance, car rental and more. Good discounts for students and under-26s.

**Travel CUTS** Canada 1800 667 2887, US 1 800 592 2887; travelcuts.com. Canadian youth and student travel firm offering discount flights and several trips combining Panama with Costa Rica and other Central American countries.

**Tucan Travel** UK 020 8896 1600 or 0800 804 8435, US 1 855 444 9110; tucantravel.com. Award-winning small travel operator offering Panama in combination with Costa Rica and other Central American destinations on some of their adventure overland tours.

**USIT** Ireland 01 602 1906, usit.ie. Ireland's main student and youth travel specialists.

**Wild Planet Adventures** US 1 800 9904376, wildplanetadventures.com. Multi-award-winning company offering excellent wildlife-focused adventure holidays (eight or thirteen days) to Panama, led by naturalist guides. Also scuba diving in Coiba and tailor-made tours.

# Getting around

**Panama has a fairly comprehensive and very efficient bus network, used by the majority of the population, which will get you around most of the mainland, though the level of comfort varies enormously. Along the western section of the Interamericana – the Panamanian section of the Pan-American Highway – luxury vehicles with reclinable seats, air conditioning, nonstop videos and on-board toilets speed along for several hours for a handful of dollars, while at the other end of the scale chivas – converted pickup trucks packed like the proverbial sardine can – grind their way up twisting mountain roads to remote villages for not a lot less.**

There are many good paved **roads** in central and western Panama, even to small villages up in the mountains, and dirt roads are also generally well graded, though in the rainy season (roughly May to mid-Dec) they can soon become a quagmire. East of Panama City are few roads of any description.

For the longer trips from Panama City – over the Cordillera Central to Bocas, deep into the Darién or to the more distant islands of Guna Yala – an **internal flight** on **Air Panama**, Panama's domestic airline, will save a lot of time. Indeed with only one road – sometimes impassable in the rainy season – into Guna Yala, climbing aboard a plane is sometimes the only way into the archipelago. And to hop from island to island in Guna Yala or ease upriver to visit Emberá villages in the Darién, the main mode of transport is a motorized **dugout** (*cayuco* or *piragua*).

### FINDING YOUR WAY

Panama is not without its frustrations: **streets** often have several names, rarely marked on a signpost; **telephone numbers** change frequently, especially for mobile phones and even for government offices; and **websites** are often not updated, or domain names left to lapse – all of which makes contacting people difficult. Moreover, the **pace of change** in Panama at the moment is phenomenal: new places to stay are mushrooming; bars, discos and restaurants, especially in Panama City and tourist areas, regularly open, close, move or change name, often lasting the summer partying and tourist season, but failing to make it through winter. This Guide will help you navigate this dynamic country, but it's always worth checking details on the ground.

## By bus

The vast brick building fronted by battalions of buses just down the road from Albrook Airport on the edge of Panama City is the Gran Terminal de Transportes de Panamá – or **Albrook bus terminal –** the hub of the **national bus system**. Most of the capital's local transport and all international and regional buses leave from here (see p.73).

The main centres, such as Santiago, Chitré and David, also have large efficient **bus terminals** on the outskirts of town complete with toilets, left-luggage facilities and restaurants. From these, regional connections and local buses – usually a mixture of battered Toyota minivans with extra fold-down aisle seating and the more comfortable Coasters – head out into the countryside in centrifugal fashion. In the smaller settlements, minibuses or *chivas* hang out in the plaza or main street waiting for an adequate number of passengers. Generally, the more **rural** the location, the more laissez-faire the bus timetable and the more likely it is that passengers will be picked up anywhere along the route.

Along most regional **bus routes** from Panama City, transport runs from 5.30/6am until 9/10pm, whereas the first buses heading into the capital from the provinces may leave from 1 to 4am to ensure passengers arrive for the start of the commercial day. Local transport in the provinces usually peters out around 6.30 or 7pm. Unless stated otherwise, all the bus services we list throughout this Guide are **daily** – but note that departures are often less frequent at weekends and in very rural areas, the last bus may not leave at all. The **timetables** for many routes can be consulted online at Ⓦthebusschedule.com/pa, which is kept reasonably up to date.

The **Interamericana** is punctuated with official and unofficial (generally at a major intersection) bus stops where you can flag down transport. Bear in mind that on Friday and Sunday afternoons, and at either end of a holiday period, when buses are jam-packed, you might be left stranded for hours.

**Ticket prices** range from $5–6 for a two-hour ride in moderate comfort to $15 for a relaxing seven-hour recline from Panama City all the way to David. There are set prices for every route, often posted on the bus window, and tourists are rarely overcharged – if in doubt about a fare ask a local on the bus. **Luggage** generally goes for free, either on the roof or in the luggage compartment, although surfboards sometimes incur extra charges. Security is not usually an issue.

**Booking ahead** for busy holiday periods and international journeys is a must, though it is only possible for international and some long-haul domestic routes. You'll need to go in person to the travel company ticket office, usually in the bus terminal, in Panama City, David or Changuinola, to buy the ticket in cash.

## By plane

**Flying** within Panama is a convenient and safe experience, though you might have your heart in your mouth landing in the more flimsy twin-props at some of the more remote airstrips of Guna Yala and the Darién. All internal flights depart from or arrive at Marcos A. Gelabert Airport (Ⓣ238 2700), more commonly known as **Albrook Airport** (after the former US Air Force base it occupies), which lies 3km northwest of Panama City centre.

**Air Panama** (Ⓦairpanama.com), the country's one **domestic airline**, operates out of Albrook, and serves around twenty destinations: the major urban areas, several locations along the largely inaccessible Comarca de Guna Yala and currently two destinations in the Darién, which are impossible to reach by road. Propeller planes seating forty to fifty passengers generally ply the urban routes, while smaller puddle-hoppers operate in the Darién and Guna Yala to suit the shorter runways – sometimes only as long as the island they're on.

**Prices** remain constant irrespective of the season, with the maximum one-way domestic fare currently around $105 (including taxes) and many much cheaper. Luggage allowances are 12kg plus 2.3kg carry-on, but full-size surfboards incur an extra charge of $20.

Compared with the long-distance buses, plane **timetables** are fairly sketchily adhered to, especially in Guna Yala and the Darién. Flights to David, Bocas and Guna Yala are booked up quickly in advance of a holiday weekend.

## By car

Away from the traffic hell that is Panama City, **driving** in Panama is generally fairly straightforward, with very good, well-signposted roads connecting the main urban centres, though it can be a different story in some of the more remote or mountainous areas.

The **Interamericana** (also called the Carretera Panamericana in Panama), Panama's main thoroughfare – part of the Pan-American Highway that travels almost 48,000km from Alaska to Chile – runs 486km from the Costa Rican border at Paso Canoas in the west, skirting several major cities, crossing the canal and bludgeoning its way through the capital before continuing another 282km and grinding to an abrupt halt in Yaviza in the eastern Darién.

Traffic for the Azuero Peninsula peels off onto the **Carretera Nacional** at Divisa, 34km east of Santiago, and branches off north across the Cordillera Central at Chiriquí for the sinuous journey across the continental divide down to the islands of Bocas del Toro on western Panama's only transisthmian route. Though an excellent paved road, it is sometimes blocked by landslides during the wettest months of the rainy season (roughly May to mid-Dec).

The only other routes across the isthmus lie east of the canal. The frequently log-jammed **Transístmica** links the capital with the country's second city of Colón; the faster **Autopista Panamá–Colón**, a toll road aimed at improving commercial traffic, runs parallel. An hour east of Panama City, beyond Chepo, a roller coaster of a road heads north from the Interamericana at El Llano, heading 40km over the mountains to Cartí, providing the only road link with Guna Yala. It's accessible most of the year, but although it's paved, only 4WD vehicles are granted access. Further east, the final stretch of the Interamericana as far as **Yaviza** is completely paved, but

every year after heavy rain a section or two gets damaged, resulting in a quagmire. Expect an increasing number of police **checkpoints** along this stretch of road, as well as along the western section of the Interamericana, as you near the Costa Rican border.

Despite Panama's decent road network, **driving at night** is best avoided because there's little illumination outside the urban centres, and drink driving, one of the main causes of accidents nationally, is common. Though there is a legal limit of 86mg, it is rarely adhered to or enforced.

If you are involved in a car **accident**, Panamanian law requires that you should not move the vehicles but should wait near them until the traffic police (*Transito*) arrive; a statement from them is required in order to file any insurance claim. Unless otherwise indicated the **speed limits** are 40km/h in urban areas, 60km/h on secondary roads and 100km/h on primary roads but these limits are neither widely advertised nor followed. Two of the most **dangerous** roads are the Interamericana, along which copious buses and heavy trucks thunder, and the route across the Cordillera Central to Bocas del Toro, when bad weather can make the hairpin bends even more scary.

**Hitching** is possible, though with all the obvious attendant risks, on the main thoroughfares, but it is unlikely anyone will stop. In the rural areas, where there is no or at best infrequent bus service, it is quite usual to thumb a lift on the back of a private pickup, though you should offer to pay at least the equivalent of a bus fare.

### Car rental

**Renting a car** makes it easier to explore some out-of-the-way spots – though if you're staying in Panama City and the Canal area it's much more convenient to use buses and taxis. You'll find all the usual international **car rental firms** represented. The larger firms have their head offices at Tocumen International Airport, with many running a downtown office and sometimes branches at Albrook and David airports too. Some operators have offices in other major cities and tourist towns. Rental **costs** vary greatly, so shop around and note that rates fluctuate according to season and demand. You may get a better deal if you book online in advance.

Virtually all rental vehicles have air conditioning. A manual economy car is the cheapest option (from approximately $25/day, or $140/week, including taxes and basic insurance cover). For a 4WD, which is probably only necessary if you want to get off the beaten track and into the national parks, bank on paying almost double that. **Fuel** costs $3.50–4 a gallon (about $1/litre) and petrol stations (often 24hr) are liberally sprinkled along the main roads.

The **minimum age** for most car rental companies is 25 but 23 will suffice for some firms provided a credit card is produced as security. A driving licence – international or from your country of origin – as well as a passport will need to be shown.

## By taxi

**Taxis**, generally in the form of a 4WD twin cab, are also a practical way of reaching rural locations that are poorly served by public transport. Official cabs are yellow, with their licence number printed on the door, though in the countryside you may come across unofficial drivers whose service is generally just as reliable.

Taxis are widely available in most **urban centres** and can save you from melting in the heat. Panama City cabs ostensibly charge fixed rates according to zones (which are rarely adhered to) or generally agreed prices for particular routes (see p.75). Most central trips within the capital during the day should not exceed $4; in other urban centres it should not exceed a couple of dollars. Across the country, a small surcharge is added for more than two passengers and prices are higher at night. While most taxi drivers are very honest, in Panama City and tourist areas like Boquete some might try to take advantage – make local enquiries about the going rates and agree on a price before getting in. The establishment of an **Uber** system in Panama City has helped to curb some drivers overcharging.

Taxi drivers can also be hired as **tourist guides**, though most will only speak Spanish – ask at your accommodation for a recommended driver. There is no set charge, but around $15 an hour is the going rate in the capital for a driver who speaks English, $10–12 an hour for a driver who can only speak Spanish. Petrol costs also need to be factored in if you want to cover a substantial distance. A full day-trip round the Canal area (both Pacific and Atlantic sides), for example, might cost around $140 but you'll need to shop around.

## By boat

Panama boasts more than 1500 islands so it's almost inevitable you'll require water transport at some stage, be it smooth sightseeing in a Canal transit or a bumpy water-taxi ride in Bocas. Fairly robust **ferries** equipped with life jackets and radio transmitters leave Panama City for Isla Taboga and

the Archipiélago de las Perlas, according to regular timetables. In the remoter regions of eastern Guna Yala, meanwhile, you could be seated on a plank in a leaking motorized **dugout** bailing out with a yoghurt carton, having spent a couple of hours asking round for a ride. Frequent **water-taxis** serve Bocas from Almirante for fixed fares ($6), whereas any trip to the Pacific island of Coiba may mean getting a group of interested people together and negotiating a deal with a fisherman.

Travelling by motorized dugout or occasionally, if you're lucky, in a slightly more comfy **skiff** (*panga*), is the norm among the communities of Guna Yala and the Darién. If a boat is already heading the way you want to travel, as a **colectivo**, you can travel *como pasajero*, and the fare will be cheaper. Otherwise, private boat rental, or **viaje especial** (which needs to cover fuel and the boat operator's time), can be expensive; awareness of the going price for diesel will help when it comes to haggling, as will knowledge of the amount of fuel necessary to cover the distance given the size of the engine. Note that the seaworthiness of vessels varies enormously; many are overloaded and lack life jackets even when heading for long trips on potentially hazardous waters. Every few months a boat somewhere sinks or capsizes and people **drown**. Make sure you check out your transport thoroughly before committing to a journey.

## By bike

Away from the Interamericana and Panama City, **cycling** is pleasant – with wonderful views and quiet roads – and growing in popularity both as recreation and a means of transport (though you won't find cycle lanes or cycle routes). Mountain bike **rental** is on the increase in tourist areas such as El Valle, Boquete, Bocas and Santa Fé, though the quality of the machine on offer varies ($3–5/hr, $10–15/day). In Panama City you'll find rental places on the Calzada de Amador, which actually possesses a cycle path, as does the recently inaugurated Cinta Costera. Exodus (Ⓦexodus.co.uk) and Explore (Ⓦexplore.co.uk) offer **cycling holidays** in Panama.

# Accommodation

**From secluded mountain ecolodges to thatched cane cabañas on deserted islands, from backpackers' party hostels to smart boutique hotels, Panama offers a wide range of accommodation. Panama City has the greatest variety, though prices are generally a lot higher than elsewhere. In touristy areas such as Bocas and Boquete prices are creeping up and more lodgings now exist at the higher end of the market, with an increasing number of comfortable lodges (often foreign-owned) and B&Bs – but there is still little outside Panama City that could truly be described as luxury. In Guna Yala you could just as likely be sleeping in a hammock, while in the Darién you might be snoozing on a thin mattress on an open-sided raised traditional Emberá dwelling.**

## Types of hotel

**Posadas** and **lodges** usually offer a fair degree of comfort in pleasant natural surroundings, whereas places prefaced with **hospedaje**, **pensión** or **residencial** are generally much simpler small family-owned lodgings. The word **cabaña** may conjure up an image of a simple thatched hut in an idyllic natural setting, but can just as easily mean a dark, windowless cement cell in an unremarkable location. **Hostal** may signify a place with dorms for backpackers but is also a synonym for a family-run hotel. The term **hotel**, too, can cover a mixed bag from a plush international five-star high-rise to a dilapidated shack, and also includes the famous by-the-hour push-button motel, often referred to as **un push**, which rents out rooms short-term for sexual liaisons. In no way unique to Panama, they are scattered all over the country, most visibly along the Interamericana, with such enticing names as *Sueño Lindo* (Sweet Dreams) or *Las Mil y Una Noches* (Thousand and One Nights). As for the much-abused prefix "**eco**", it may simply denote pleasant natural surroundings, and is no guarantee of sustainable environmental practices or social responsibility.

### ACCOMMODATION PRICES

For each accommodation option listed in this Guide we give the cheapest rate for a **double room** (one double bed) for one night in high season (outside public holidays), including tourist tax, with a private bathroom where available; we state in the reviews if only shared bathrooms are available. Dorm beds and camping are quoted per person, unless otherwise stated, as are prices for **homestays**.

### Facilities

Neither name nor price is much of an indication of what you'll get for your money, though a private **bathroom** is often squeezed into even fairly rudimentary and minuscule lodgings. In the lowlands, even the cheapest establishments usually have **air conditioning**, though not necessarily **hot water**; in the highlands air conditioning and fans are unnecessary and usually absent though hot water is almost always available. **Wi-fi** is widely available, and almost always free. Guna Yala and the Darién are the two exceptions: in the former there is virtually no wi-fi, and in the latter coverage is limited and unreliable. As in most other Latin American countries, toilet paper should not be put down the **toilet**, but into the adjacent wastebasket, because it can clog the system in all but the most modern top-end hotels. If in doubt, enquire at reception.

**Breakfast** is not always provided, and where it is available, it may not be included in the rates. In our reviews we presume breakfast is not included unless otherwise stated.

## Hostels

Panama's **hostel** scene is expanding as the country attracts increasing numbers of backpackers. Most hostels have common areas, shared kitchens, free wi-fi or internet access and bags of useful information about the surrounding area. Currently there are about two dozen in the country – mainly in Panama City, Bocas, Boquete, David and Santa Catalina. Advance **booking**, where allowed, is advisable in high season. A dorm bunk varies in price from around $11 to $17, occasionally including coffee or a light breakfast, and increasingly including air conditioning in lowland areas. Some establishments also offer private rooms at around $25–35. Some of the **national parks** and protected areas offer dorm accommodation (usually $15/person/night) and a shared kitchen.

## Camping

There is virtually no organized **camping** in Panama, though a few lodgings allow tents if asked and some places provide tents to rent in summer (Dec–April). In rural communities you can almost always find someone willing to let you to camp on their land for a small fee. Alternatively, there are long swathes of empty beaches to pitch a tent on, although you should always seek local advice, since they are not universally safe; beach campers in touristy areas such as Santa Clara and Isla Bastimentos have periodically been subject to thefts and muggings. The **national parks** seem more set up for camping, with set fees (usually $6/person a night), but the sites rarely offer facilities beyond those shared with the park wardens at the park entrance: a toilet, cold-water shower and rudimentary kitchen with limited utensils.

## Homestays

**Homestays**, a good budget accommodation option, often help the local economy more directly while providing an opportunity to engage in cross-cultural interaction. They may also be the only option during major fiestas in a town that is short of formal lodgings. In indigenous communities, such as in Guna Yala and the Darién, a homestay is frequently the norm when overnighting in a village; you will need to arrange this with the chief or tourist coordinator on arrival (see pp.252–253 & p.283).

## Pricing and taxes

Most mid-range and high-end accommodation operates a dual **pricing system**: high-season rates (mid-Dec to April) generally coincide with the dry season, whereas the rest of the year counts as low season, when it's possible to find significant discounts, especially for online bookings. On top of high-season rates, some establishments in Panama City and the major holiday destinations hike their prices even higher for Carnaval, Easter (Semana Santa), Christmas and New Year. Some lodgings in places that are primarily weekend retreats, such as Isla Grande and El Valle, charge more from Friday to Sunday, occasionally demanding a two- or three-night minimum stay over the weekend.

Places with more than nine rooms are subject to a ten-percent **tourist tax** (though even smaller lodgings sometimes charge), which is not always included in the advertised rate. Note too that in mid-range hotels a double room often means a room with two double beds and you might have to specify one double bed (*una cama doble*, or *una cama matrimonial*) if you want to keep costs down. Room costs are usually based on two people sharing, but many rooms have an extra single bed, which a third person can have for an extra $10–15. Children under 12 are often allowed to stay for free.

# Food and drink

**Panamanian cuisine is infused with numerous culinary influences, notably Afro-Antillean, indigenous, Spanish, Chinese and American. Cosmopolitan Panama City offers the greatest variations in terms of gastronomy and price, from a $3–4 plate of noodles and chicken in the public market to ornate fusion cuisine served on damask tablecloths. You can take your pick from a host of world cuisines, including American – and thankfully not just McDonald's and KFC.**

In the capital, **Panamanian food** rarely features on the menus of the mid- to high-end restaurants, outside a few tourist-oriented venues, but in markets, hole-in-the-wall restaurants and out in the interior, it's much easier to find local specialities – often heavy on starch and frequently fried.

Outside the capital and the major tourist destinations of Boquete and Bocas, there is less variety and dining is often more informal and a lot cheaper; travellers on a tight budget can easily find simple well-cooked food in *fondas* (basic restaurants), which offer *comida corriente* – also known as the *menú del día* – (meal of the day) for very little. **Vegetarians** will be challenged since, as elsewhere in Central America, even the veggie staple of beans and rice can be cooked in pork fat. Your best bet is to head for a Chinese restaurant, which exist in most towns, or one of the proliferating pizzerias, or to stock up with the fresh fruit and vegetables that abound in local markets.

Predominantly self-service **cafeterías** – the Panamanian equivalent of American diners – keep going from around 6 or 7am until 11pm or midnight in the urban centres. Out in the countryside, local restaurants and **fondas** may also open for all three meals but shut shortly after nightfall, depending on demand.

## Breakfast

Panama's filling **desayuno típico** (traditional breakfast) is aimed at sustaining workers for a hard day in the fields. Deep-fried favourites include tortillas (thick cornmeal cakes), *carimañolas* (mashed boiled yuca – cassava or manioc – stuffed with ground beef) and *hojaldres* (discs of sweetened leavened dough, which at best are delightfully crispy and tasty but at worst are chewy

### TRADITIONAL DISHES

#### PANAMANIAN MAINS

Non-vegetarians should not leave Panama without sampling the **national dish**, *sancocho*. Variations are served in many parts of Latin America and even within Panama the meal is prepared in numerous ways; essentially it's a hearty chicken-based soup with large chunks of yuca and other filling root vegetables, or maybe even plantain and sweetcorn, flavoured with cilantro – a herb similar to coriander but more pungent – exemplifying the Caribbean culinary influence. Other Panamanian variations of ubiquitous **Latin dishes** include the unappetizing-sounding *ropa vieja* ("old clothes" – spicy shredded beef over rice), *ceviche* (white fish, shrimp or octopus marinated in lime juice with chopped onion and garlic plus hot pepper and fresh coriander) and *mondongo* (a slow-cooked tripe- and chorizo-based stew with root vegetables, laced with garlic and coriander or cilantro).

#### COASTAL CUISINE

**Seafood** is a Panamanian staple in both the Pacific and Caribbean lowlands. In the latter, the Afro-Antillean influence is dominant – typical dishes include rice cooked in coconut milk and seafood prepared with spices and judicious amounts of lime. *Corvina* (sea bass) is the most widely eaten fish, but you can also find snapper, grouper, dorado, shrimp, langoustines, crab and lobster, though you should refuse the last four if offered them during the closed season (Dec 1–April 15 in the Pearl Islands, March 1–June 30 along the Caribbean coast) unless you know they have come from a freezer. Locally farmed trout is a speciality of the Chiriquí Highlands.

#### GREENS AND SPICES

While starch and carbohydrates abound in most traditional foods, **greenery** is scarce. Don't be surprised if your salad accompaniment is merely a lettuce leaf supporting a slice of tomato and a couple of onion rings. Green vegetables are even conspicuous by their absence in many restaurants outside the capital, though they can often be found in local markets. Spices are generally used sparingly, but there's usually some *salsa picante* on the table to help add a kick.